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Public Libraries

What Are Special Libraries?

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The field of library work represented by the Special library association is so limited that it is probably thoroughly known to very few librarians who are busy in other lines of library work.

The commercial or business library might be classified under an old term, almost forgotten in these days of the ascendancy of the free public library, but nevertheless very suggestive of an interesting period in the development of libraries in this country, namely, the proprietary library, maintained, as it is, by private individuals for their own personal needs and having no lawful obligation to serve the public or permit its resources to be used outside of its personal circle.

The organization of such libraries in business firms was, as far as I know, first done in the east, and the organization of the Special libraries association largely emanated from them; the libraries which have played a prominent part in its organization being those of Stone & Webster, a great public utility and engineering corporation, the firm of Arthur D. Little Company, engineering chemists, the financial library of Fiske & Robinson, and others.

Commercial librarianship, however, is not by any means confined to the east. Our middle west is represented by Studebaker Bros., at South Bend, Ind., the Commonwealth Edison Company of Chicago, H. M. Byllesby & Co., and others.

Associated with commercial libraries in the Special libraries association are libraries which are special in that they are made up of a highly specialized selection of material and also serve a limited constituency, but are not maintained by business houses. Of this type a conspicuous example is the library of the New York state public service commission. and we may also put in this group legislative reference libraries, special technology departments of some of our large public libraries, and libraries of engineering societies, as the library of the Western society of engineers, Chicago.

To return to the commercial library, which, as you see, is only one type of the so-called special libraries, we find that they may be classified under two heads. The first class may be called Welfare libraries—libraries maintained by firms for the betterment of their employes. These libraries are doing work similar to what our public libraries are doing, only at closer range and with a more limited constituency. They supply literature for recreation and general culture,

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and also technical literature for self-improvement along the lines of the company business.

The second class of commercial libraries may be called "Professional" libraries, for want of a better term, which possibly someone may be able to supply for me. These libraries exist only to render special expert service to their firms on subjects touching company business. The library of H. M. Byllesby & Co. is an example of this class; while the Commonwealth Edison Company library belongs both to class one and to class two—for one of its leading motives is to encourage the self-improvement of employes, while it also renders service to the heads of the various departments of the company. The Studebaker library, at South Bend, Ind., is also similar in nature.

You are perfectly familiar with what we call the "welfare" aspect of commercial libraries, and let us, therefore, hasten on to the "professional" side of the commercial library, as I am sure you are asking, "What is the particular character and work of this kind of a library, and how does it differ from other libraries?" Not so much how it differs from the public library, which is evident, but as to how it differs from the university library, which also serves a professional constituency. Let me briefly, therefore, describe a few aspects of the professional commercial library with which I am most familiar, that of H. M. Byllesby & Co., engineers, who construct, operate and finance public utilities.

Its resources are, first, of course, books and periodicals, our range of subjects in general being limited to engineering and public utility operations.

The subjects of electric, steam, gas and hydraulic engineering necessarily attract other subjects, as geology, river surveys, stream measurements, rainfall, timber preservation, concrete, building materials, building construction, information on the production of natural gas and fuel oil, and kindred subjects.

On the public utility side, the library must furnish material on rates, depreciation, statistics of public utilities' operations, and the legislation of public service commissions.

Photographs also play an important part in our library. The history of the construction of dams, power houses, transmission lines, and other subjects, is shown in a series of photographs, which we handle as we do books. Duplicate photographs and films must also be cared for by the library.

Topographical survey maps, river surveys, and the issuing of maps of our own covering the territory served by our utilities, are also included under the head of library work.

And last, but decidedly not least in our library equipment, we have what is called "technical" and "special data" files, composed of manuscript material in the form of letters, reports, and special examinations, on engineering and operating subjects vital to company business.

The professional business man does not build up a library for the sake of having a library. He is not interested in making a good library showing in regard to the quantity of books on the shelves, but he is vitally interested in the quality of the material. He desires no obsolete literature, but information authoritative and up-to-date. To him, knowledge is simply power—principally electric power in these days—and he is not interested in systems of classification or cataloging, as a number of college professors are, much

to the sorrow of many a librarian. He has just one object in view—he wants specific information and he wants it quickly, and the business librarian's watchword must constantly be, quick, accurate, authoritative service. No matter where or how you get the information desired, so long as you get it and get it quick!

It would be interesting to discuss the methods of work, the necessary personal qualifications for commercial librarianship, and the general knowledge of business conditions necessary for success in commercial library work, but these topics do not legitimately come within the limit of our subject, or our time.

H. M. Byllesby & Co. adopted at the start this library policy, which some of you recognize as an aspect of the discussions on co-ordination of libraries, in which the American library association is interested: We will keep our library down as far as possible to a small working collection of books, and our librarian shall be a go-between us and the other library facilities of the city of Chicago, when we want information not available in our own collection.

The type of expert engineer with which I have had much to do this past year represents the highest degree of professionalism. He has gone on in his experience to that further place of knowledge toward which many college professors look longingly, but are not able to reach, because of the limitations of their teaching work. He does not have any use for the average literature of his profession, but requires the most exact and exhaustive information available. Do not, therefore, think of the commercial library as a part of a mere money-making scheme, but rather as the highest type of a professional library, demanding of its librarian constant study to obtain and handle intelligently information on a variety of difficult subjects.

May I be permitted to digress a moment from my main point and speak in regard to the purely commercial side of public utility companies? There is a tremendous amount of superficial information and cheap writing abroad in regard to the rights of the public as against the unscrupulous money-making public service corporation. The charges made may be true of some companies, but I, for one, personally resent having them applied wholesale to every public service corporation.

Close personal contact with one utility company for the past year has convinced me that public utilities can be, and are, conducted in many cases with a high sense of honor as to the treatment which is due the public, as to what is a fair profit for the service rendered, and with a sincere desire not only to please the public but also to enter into close friendly cooperation with the community served. Something of this spirit can be found crystallized in a little pamphlet recently privately printed and issued to all the members of the operating organization of H. M. Byllesby & Co. It bears this suggestive title upon which I will not linger to make any comment—"Yourself as a public servant."

Commercial librarianship is in its infancy, but I believe it is a movement which has come to stay. The plan of the Special libraries association to induce these special libraries to cooperate in making available through special indexes and lists library material not readily available at present is an exceedingly worth while ideal. Whether the best results can be obtained by the Special libra-

ries association working independently or working in close relationship to the American library association is yet to be determined. Personally, my observation leads me to think that close cooperation with the American library association will bring about the best results. For, while the work of the so-called general libraries can be greatly helped by the Special libraries association, it is also true that the Special libraries association can receive much help from the tried methods of work and the accepted safe machinery for the transmission of knowledge with which our general library workers are so thoroughly acquainted.

I say this in view of the fact that a number of the librarians of Special libraries, while having a thorough knowledge of the subjects in which they are interested, have not had the opportunity for the study of classification and cataloging and other methods of work with which the ordinary trained librarian is familiar.

It would seem to me, therefore, unwise that the Special libraries association should spend any time or energy, as has once or twice been suggested, in devising brand new systems of administration for commercial work, for I am convinced from personal experience that so far as machinery goes, not new inventions, but simply adaptation is needed to handle successfully commercial library work.

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